Charlie Bishop

Manager of local Pendleton Woolen Mill maintains philosophy of importance of area, family history

By MIKE GALLAGHER
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In this day and age, with so much emphasis in the business world placed on technology and keeping pace with the information age, it is rare when a company places equal importance on preserving its sense of history.

At Pendleton Woolen Mills in Washougal, plant manager Charlie Bishop is attempting to do just that. Although Bishop is currently overseeing many changes at Pendleton, he is also a key player in helping preserve not only the heritage of the mill, but the community of Washougal itself.

Bishop's deep-rooted sense of local history can be traced to his own family heritage, as well as being part of a multi-generational family business. Bishop's grandfather, Clarence Bishop, and Roy Bishop, Clarence's brother, purchased their first woolen mill in 1909 in Pendleton, Ore. The Pendleton Woolen Mill was a success in its first year, with sales reaching over $65,000. Expansion was a logical step for the Bishops and in 1912, armed with a $4,000 loan from his mother Fanny Kay Bishop, Clarence leased a woolen mill in Washougal that had been forced to cease operations due to sluggish business conditions.

Under the direction of Clarence and Roy Bishop, and with the expertise of Fanny Kay, the Washougal Woolen Mill was soon on the road to success. In addition to the loan of $4,000 that Fanny Kay provided, she also had experience in the wool business. Her father, Thomas Kay Bishop, had been the operator of the Thos. Kay Woolen Mill in Salem, Ore., since 1889. The mill in Washougal, which employed just 35 people in 1912, remained being called the Washougal Woolen Mill until 1953, at which point it was finally incorporated under the Pendleton Woolen Mill name.

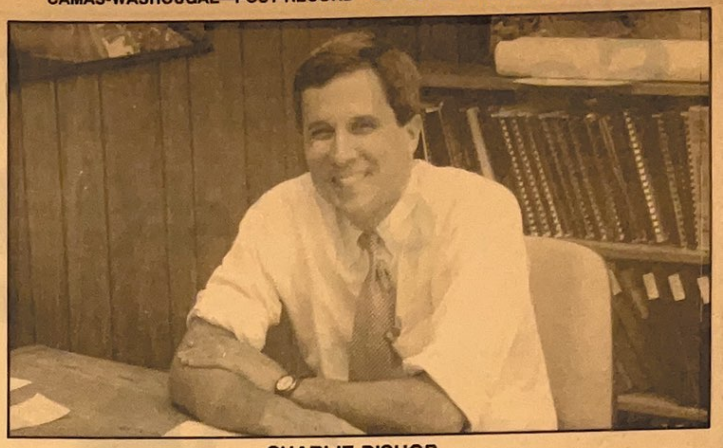
Bishop emphasizes that the primary focus of the Washougal Pendleton Woolen Mill today, with 300 employees, remains as a manufacturing center for the entire company. But, because of recent improvements made at the mill, particularly in the die house and finishing area, the company has been able to free up floor space in the old building that was built in 1909. That afforded Pendleton an opportunity to move the outlet store into a much bigger space. The new store opened to the public in April of this year, and is three times the size of the old outlet store.

The expanded Pendleton Woolen Mills outlet store is still used to sell seconds and close-out items. But the expansion also allowed the company to offer some first quality goods to enhance the overall assortment of merchandise. Products can also be displayed much better with the additional room. "Now we can show how we coordinate different fabrics and different garments, as opposed to just putting out seconds on a table," Bishop said. "A customer can find a navy blue jacket displayed with a navy skirt, or a blouse. We just didn't have those opportunities before."

Bishop stressed that history is still very important at Pendleton, despite the changes and growth within the company. "As we move into newer more modern buildings that are made of concrete and steel, we want very much to preserve some of the older buildings and our sense of history," he said. "The design of the new outlet store ties in very nicely with that."

In addition to the upgrade of the mill's outlet store, Bishop is involved with many of Pendleton's technological changes that have taken place lately. For example, the company recently invested in computerized design equipment. Now the design of a very complicated fabric or blanket can originate on a computer at the Portland corporate office. From there in just minutes, the design pattern and information can be transferred to the Pendleton mill. There a blanket is weaved in a matter of minutes and sent to the Washougal plant the next day. "In less than 24 hours, we can go from a designers concept to a finished piece of fabric," Bishop said.

"The process is unbelievable, it used to take us years at times to develop patterns," he continued. "A lot of our old Indian blankets were developed years ago and because of the high cost and time it took to develop new patterns, we've stayed with a lot of the same old patterns. Fortunately they've been terrific and endured over a lot of years. Today we're able to make complicated things very quickly. The entire textile industry is becoming more and more capital intensive rather than labor intensive."



CHARLIE BISHOP

Bishop is an active participant in the Camas-Washougal Museum Committee, which is heading up a funding drive to build a museum in downtown Washougal. "We're very pleased to be supportive of that effort," he said. "That's a natural for us at Pendleton, with our sense of history. As Clark County grows, we feel it is important that Washougal keeps its sense of history and community. It's rare today, especially in the greater Portland-Vancouver area, to still have that community identity."

The museum presents a real challenge for Washougal and Camas residents, according to Bishop, but he feels the goal of constructing such a museum is an attainable one. "There is a tremendous amount of grass roots support on the museum committee and in the historical society for this project," he said. "The fund-raising goals may be challenging, but there are some very small towns that have built some very fine museums that our committee is in touch with. I think it is a great project."

Bishop says that while working in a family-run business has been challenging at times, overall it has been a very positive experience. "It's been terrific, and has provided me some opportunities that I might not otherwise have had," he said. In addition to himself, other family members include his father Brot Bishop, chairman of the company, his uncle Mort Bishop, vice chairman and former president of the company, a brother John Bishop who works in a Pendleton mill in New Hampshire, a brother Peter Bishop who is a merchandiser in the men's wear division at the corporate office in Portland, and first cousin Mort Bishop, who is head of the women's wear division at the corporate office in Portland.

PENDLETON WOOLEN MILL in Washougal was constructed in the early 1900s. This photo was taken in 1911 when it was still known as the Washougal Woolen Mill. Thomas Jenny, in the center of the photo, had the contract to build the mill.